

EAST TIMOR STRUGGLECHRISTIANS CONFERENCE OF ASIA25 SEPTEMBER TO 10 OCTOBER 1984NEW DELHI - INDIASPEECH BY MIMI FERREIRA

Darwin - Australia - P.O. Box. 41258

INTRODUCTION

It is a privilege to be able to be here today at this inspirational gathering of real-world Christians, and to address you on the terrible troubles of my home country, East Timor.

I particularly thank the organisers, especially Chris, for all their encouragement, and to the Australian group Christians in Solidarity with East Timor.

WHY IS EAST TIMOR AN IMPORTANT TOPIC TODAY?

The reason is, that in the last decade, a S.E. Asian nation of less than 700,000 people has been invaded by the military might of its large neighbour, causing the deaths of between 2 to 300,000 people, total economic, social, cultural and religious disruption, and untold horrors and sufferings, which continue to this very day.

I will explain further.

EAST TIMOR GEOGRAPHY AND COLONIAL HISTORY

East Timor is 400 km north-west of Darwin, Australia, at the Eastern end of the Indonesian islands, as you can see from the map.

Further to the East is another land oppressed by Indonesia. This is the Western half of New Guinea, Irian Jaya. The struggle for self-determination and human rights of the Melanesian people there has much in common with our own struggle.

East Timor shares a common land boundary with West Timor.

The people of the island are Malay/Melanesian origin, with some Chinese and Portugese also.

The native languages are dialects of TETUN. However, due to 4 centuries of different colonial domination, the West half also spoke Dutch, whilst the East spoke Portugese.

The economy of both sides was peasant agriculture, with poorly developed infrastructure and industry. Sandal wood had been an important export, whilst coffee was a more modern source of export earnings.

After World War 11, the former Dutch colonial empire in S.E. Asia became Indonesia, except for West Guinea which did so in 1962 amid much controversy.

Portugal maintained its colonial empire much longer. However, in the early 1970's its hold on the African colonies was loosened, leading to revolution in Portugal itself, and the eventual restoration of democracy there.

Within East Timor, the local population had never willingly accepted Portugese domination, with many local rebellions which were savagely put down.

In 1942 Australia sent commandos to East Timor to hinder Japanese war plans. Less than 300 commandos successfully harassed over 30,000 Japanese, but this led again to terrible reprisals with 60,000 Timorese killed, as Jim Dunn's recent authoritative book documents.

HISTORY 1974-75

So you can see that with our history of oppression, the people were ready for the chance for self rule that developed in 1974 and 1975. Political parties were started, and plans made.

The two main parties were called UDT and Fretilin, both moderates, with UDT more to the right of Fretilin. Both were in coalition, wanting gradual transition to independence.

However in August 1975 after visiting Jakarta, the leaders of UDT launched a coup against Fretilin, resulting in a brief civil war for about 3 weeks, during which 2000 people were killed. After that, the country settled down to rule by Fretilin, who had soon to cope with an additional major problem - Indonesian

land invasion. During this period the Portugese colonial administration de-camped to a neighbouring island, Atauro, (now a notorious prison island), and would not return.

The East Timorese put up strong resistance to Indonesian ground forces. During one attack, on the 16th October 1975, 5 Australian newsmen were killed at Balibo, and to this day neither the Indonesian nor Australian governments have provided honest reports on this matter. The Fretilin administration repeatedly invited international observers, newsmen and organisations to observe the situation, but were largely ignored. It seemed that established governments did not want to harm relations with Indonesia, especially as that country had important oil exports.

In November 1975 the Australian Prime Minister Whitlam was dismissed from office, and an interim government took over. General Suharto decided that this was the time for a major assault. His General Benny Murdani, who professes to be a Christian, claimed that they would control East Timor in 2 days.

The full scale attack by Indonesian land, sea and air forces was launched on 7th December 1975, but met fierce resistance. Huge casualties resulted from battles and brutal reprisals. Within a few months, the casualties numbered up to 100,000 killed.

HISTORY 1976-80

There followed a heroic resistance and stalemate that saw Indonesia control the towns and coastal strip, whilst Fretilin controlled 90% of the interior mountain region.

In 1977 and 1978 the Indonesians stepped up their military actions using Bronco aircraft supplied by the U.S.A. for that purpose. They concentrated on destroying villages and crops, and keeping the people on the move. This plunged the island into famine. Hundreds of thousands of people surrendered, while about 100,000 more people died of starvation and oppression. All this was largely hidden to the outside world until the journalist Peter Rodgers smuggled revealing photos to the world press. Some aid was sent by world agencies, but very little actually reached the people.

HISTORY 1981-84

Resistance activity was at a low ebb until 1981 when the forces re-grouped and launched effective attacks against the occupying forces. Now the resistance did not try to maintain a large population in the mountains, in contrast to 1976-78.

The resistance was so effective that in March 1983 the Indonesian Colonel Purwanto travelled to Fretilin lines and signed a cease fire, as you can see in the book and slides.

This lasted until an Australian Parliamentary delegation led by Bill Morrison helped to end it. Morrison was the Australian Foreign Minister in 1975 who denied any knowledge of Indonesian ground attacks and is a friend of Murdani.

The Christian General Murdani vowed to wipe out the resistance once and for all, and put a further 14,000 Indonesian troops into battle in 1983. Even this has failed.

PRESENT

So the present situation is a country isolated from the world by the Indonesian military, with gross violations of human rights at all levels, 2 to 300,000 people killed from an initial population of under 700,000, where torture, disappearances, rape and all manner of brutality is a common event. There is forced learning of Indonesian in schools, and denial of family, cultural, land, language and religious rights.

Indonesia has lost 30,000 of its own troops, and now plans to settle hundreds of thousands of imported farmers to complete the genocide - as they are also doing in Irian Jaya.

ROLE OF CHURCH

In all this, the role of the church has been of utmost importance to the Timorese and more recently to the whole world perception of events.

Many Timorese were Roman Catholic Christians, and in the face of the horrors of war, and the courage of the Church, at this stage a vast majority profess Christianity.

Since the early days of the invasion, priests and religious have been with the people and suffering with them. An old priest Fr. Leoneto Rego was allowed to return to Portugal in about late 1978, and his factual accounts were an important source of information.

The Apostolic Administrator was for many years Mgr. Costa Lopes, a Timorese patriot. After years of enduring the sufferings, he became a public critic from about 1980, and for that has been vilified by prominent apologists for Indonesia.

In 1983 he was invited by the Pope to retire, but his successor, Mgr. Belo, widely viewed as an appointment less likely to offend the Indonesians, has proved more successful in achieving a powerful statement of support for the Timorese from the Indonesian Bishops' Conference. A copy of this statement is printed in papers available here.

In 1984 therefore, for the first time Church property and personell are being directly harassed. The religious and the people of East Timor have wondered why they have been so deserted. It's time this situation ended.

INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY

International Solidarity has been important to the Timorese, but has never been influential in determining their struggle. They make their own decisions, and fight on using their original Portugese army weapons, and others captured from the often unwilling Indonesians and some Timorese conscripts.

However, International Solidarity will be important to end the struggle and restore human rights to the Timorese. Although the United Nations each year from 1975 until last year condemned Indonesia and told it to get out of East Timor, this has had little effect. Indonesia has been supported by the U.S.A. in its paranoia about independent or nationalist or leftist governments, and not opposed by Australia.

It is important to get the non-aligned nations to put pressure on Indonesia to stop its genocidal actions in Timor and West Irian. Pressure must be applied to politicians, newsmen, churches, youth movements, and governments, and be made to be effective. Rights under the U.N. charter, and what we believe to be rights of human dignity under God, need to be ensured by our own strong actions. God's will be done through us!

The Timorese appeal to you to support their right to life and their right to freedom. They have shown by their amazing heroic struggle against overwhelming military force that nothing less than the right to self-determination will be sufficient.

This is their right. It is the only way to stop the slaughter. We ask for your support and God's strength.